

Life Support: Giving aircrews peace of mind

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People in the 58th Operations Support Squadron's Life Support section work hard to maintain equipment for aircrew members, but they would be happy if none of them ever have to use it.

That's because they maintain survival equipment such as body armor helmets, life survival vests, flares and global positioning instruments. Equipment used if an aircraft crashes and aircrews have to survive at sea, in an unknown area or hostile territory.

"Maintaining this equipment is extremely important because it would have to make the difference between life or death," said Staff Sgt. Todd Richards, NCO in-charge of Life Support.

However, the equipment is only half of it, the flight also teaches aircrews how to use it and gives refresher survival training.

Training is a week-long course consisting of water and land survival. In water training, students learn about the life rafts and vests. In land survival, students learn to find food, shelter, how to hide, navigate and avoid being captured.

"We can teach students how to survive but the will to survive comes from them," said Master Sgt. Ted Poe, superintendent of Life Support. "It's all mental. That's why we train them here. We let them learn and make mistakes here, because if they're ever in the real situation, there's no room for mistakes."

Eighteen people take care of the aircrews in the 58th Special Operations Wing. Their job is so unique, the shop sets up displays at various local and state events and has been asked to give speeches and demonstrations.

"There's not really a job on the civilian side like this," said Sergeant Richards. "It is Air Force-unique."

But this Air Force-unique job invokes a personal sense of fear and pride, said Sergeant Poe.

"I've been doing this job for more than 20 years," he said. "It's hard to explain the feeling I get when I hear about a plane going down somewhere. I worry about the crew because like I said, you can teach them how to survive but you can't teach them the will to survive. That's in them. But when they come back, they return with honor. And that's what the job's about. Giving them the equipment and skills they need to return with honor."

Left: Downed aircraft members perform escape and evasion techniques to a pick-up point for rescue

Below: A member of the local media hooks Master Sgt. Edgar Poe to a microphone in preparation for interviews during the training day.

Right: Aggressors search for downed aircrew.



Left: During a water survival exercise, trainees pile into a 20-man life raft.

Above: Trainees discuss map and compass orientation and how to use it to get to the next point.

Right: Pilots practice treading water in life preservers and anti-exposure suits. If downed in cold water, pilots would last longer in an anti-exposure suit than a normal flight suit.



Photos by Todd Berenger